

It's Time to Get "REAL" About the Identity of the Funeral Director

Dr. Jacquelyn Taylor has developed a method by which national funeral industry leaders can resolve the long-standing quagmire regarding whether funeral service is a profession or a trade. The failure to resolve this question has kept practitioners from having a clear identity in contemporary society and it puts funeral service practitioners at risk of becoming irrelevant. The project being proposed by Dr. Taylor is the "Referendum on Education and Licensure" or "The REAL Project," and the deliverable will be the nation's first consensus on what credentials should be required for the practice of funeral service. Once the template is in place, funeral service organizations can take model legislation to all the states and finally develop uniform licensing law throughout the country. This unique and important scholarly endeavor will be the focus of Dr. Taylor's endeavors for the foreseeable future. The information below outlines the project's structure.

Project Overview

The REAL Project grew out of the doctoral dissertation work which Dr. Taylor completed in June 2011. The dissertation focused on how the funeral industry became stalled in its evolution toward full professionalization and how the failure to adapt threatens the viability of the occupational group in contemporary American society. Through a comprehensive examination of archives from funeral service organizations, Dr. Taylor proved that the funeral industry has been having the same debate about whether or not it is a profession for over fifty years.

Dr. Taylor also delved into the extensive body of knowledge about how occupations become professions. What she discovered is that the more developed a profession is, the more control its members have over the environment. For example, medical doctors belong to the preeminent profession in America. There is no other occupational group that commands more respect and has more control over its environment than physicians. But it was not always so. At the beginning of the 20th Century, doctors were not widely respected. But contrary to popular belief, medicine did not evolve naturally to its current status. Instead, it was medical doctors who got together and decided, at a certain point in time, they were going to increase standards, professionalize their field, and take control of their environment. The way they accomplished this was by requiring more education, rigorous examination, and licensing laws that keep out those who are not deemed worthy to be a physician.

Funeral service is at a similar critical juncture; although sadly we lag behind by several decades. It is time for those of us in this field to once and for all make up our minds about whether we want to pursue full on professionalization or simply admit that we are a commercial enterprise, albeit a worthwhile one, and then embrace the consequences that are borne out of our decision. If we decide to pursue professionalization, we must raise educational and licensing requirements. That is the only pathway to being accepted as a true profession. If we decide to go the commercial enterprise route, there is no need to have mortuary schools, licensing examinations, or state boards. Dr. Taylor is prepared to devote the foreseeable future to helping the industry make this crucial decision through a very specific process that she has titled "The Referendum on Education and Licensure" or "The REAL Project."

The REAL Project will consist of a series of roundtable meetings to be conducted in ten (10) regions throughout the United States over a period of 12-18 months. There will be three (3) rounds of meetings” each round separated by a few months. This format requires a major commitment on the part of participants; but it is necessary to permit the assimilation of the voluminous and complex information that will be generated. Moreover, participants will need time to seek input from their constituents in their region whom they represent. Every effort will be made to ensure that the broadest possible array of stakeholders is included.

The process will begin with participants learning a specific technique that is designed to enhance decision making. The experience will be unique in that it requires a firm commitment on the part of participants to delve more deeply into controversial issues than they ever have before. Thus the sessions will inevitably provoke conflict; but this must be seen as a necessary and even desirable part of the process. Ultimately, the successful outcome will be the nation’s first ever consensus on what educational credentials are required for the practice of funeral service. The resulting template can then be implemented throughout the states and progress can be made on clearly defining the role of the funeral service practitioner for the foreseeable future.

The process to be used in this project is drawn from the work of Otto Scharmer (2009) on “Theory U” or “Deep Thinking.” In brief, Dr. Scharmer postulated that social groups tend to make decisions too early in the process of considering issues because members merely “download” old information and assumptions rather than persevering through the discomfort and conflict that comes with digging deep enough to ferret out concealed issues. Once those obstacles have been revealed and resolved, Scharmer holds that conflict can dissolve and optimal solutions emerge naturally. This ideal state is achieved through skilled facilitation that creates a safe, “holding environment,” where stakeholders can discover more valuable, constructive information that conditions better decisions. Various facilitation techniques will be used to ensure that all voices are heard and all opinions are respected. The process is challenging, time consuming, and costly. But the end result will reap rewards that make it a valuable, if not crucial investment.

The project will be facilitated by Dr. Jacquelyn Taylor whose Ph.D. is in Ethical and Creative Leadership with a secondary concentration in Public Policy. Dr. Taylor has developed a special expertise in “Adaptive Change Management” that deeply informs her work. She is also a funeral service practitioner and educator with more than 38 years experience who brings a unique perspective and ability to this work that will benefit the entirety of the death care sector.

*Reprinted with permission
June 2013*